New Sweden: Trade, Conquest, and the Making of Pennsylvania

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Before Europeans arrived, the Delaware Valley had been inhabited for thousands of years by Native peoples. They practiced a form of slash-and-burn agriculture, using controlled fire to clear and maintain fields for cultivation.

In 1609 and 1610, Dutch and English explorers sailed through the region but did not establish permanent settlements.

By the early 1620s, the Dutch claimed the Delaware Valley as part of New Netherland. Their claim was based largely on exploration and the establishment of small trading posts rather than permanent communities.

In 1638, New Sweden was founded at Fort Christina (now Wilmington, Delaware) and included parts of present-day Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, and Maryland.

Sweden, rich in copper and silver, relied heavily on trade for other goods. Hoping to expand its reach and become a global power, it set its sights on North America.

During the 1500s, the Swedish crown encouraged people from Finland to settle in Sweden for their slash-and-burn farming skills. Many left and made new homes in the forests of Varmland, Sweden.

The Swedes and Finns were distinct peoples, with different cultures and entirely different languages. Swedish is a Germanic language, while Finnish is a Uralic language, so the two are not even remotely similar. In many cases, communication required translation. To put that into perspective, it would be like someone speaking Hungarian to someone speaking German.

Around 1637, Peter Minuit, former colonial governor of New Amsterdam, who had purchased Manhattan for the Dutch, had a falling out with the Dutch and turned to Sweden. He pitched a bold plan to start a trading post in North America, a region he knew well.

Sweden saw the opportunity. Beaver hats were the height of fashion in Europe, but European beavers were nearly extinct. North America had plenty, and Sweden wanted in. They backed Minuit's plan, knowing success would depend on building strong ties with the Native people of the area.

Sweden struggled to find people willing to relocate to New Sweden. Many Swedes had heard frightening things about America, such as that they could be killed, and that there were no churches. In the beginning, New Sweden was largely settled by soldiers. The colony's primary purpose was to profit from trade. The plan was to exchange European goods like cloth, tools, and weapons for beaver furs and skins provided by the Native people of the region. These furs were in high demand in Europe, especially for beaver hats.

Eventually, it was discovered that the Finns were willing to leave. They had been living in Sweden for over 100 years. Known for their slash-and-burn agriculture, the Finns used a method where land was clear-cut and remaining vegetation was burned. The resulting ash created a nutrient-rich layer that helped fertilize crops.

Interestingly, the Native people of the Delaware Valley practiced a similar form of slash-and-burn agriculture. Like the Finns, they were woodland people. They carved wood, hunted game together, and even had sweat lodges, very much like the Finnish sauna. Sweat lodges are traditional Native American

steam baths used for cleansing the body, mind, and spirit. Heated stones are placed in a pit, and water is poured over them to create steam during a ceremony. Finnish saunas are small wooden rooms with hot stones. Water is tossed on the stones to create steam. They are used for relaxation and health and have been part of Finnish life for centuries. Both traditions use heat, wood, and stone for cleansing and renewal.

Sweden showed a level of respect toward the Native people of the region that was rare among European powers. Unlike the Dutch and English, the Swedes often sought cooperation over conquest. At the time, some European theorists even debated whether the Native people of the region were fully human or a lower form of life, which was a disturbing view Sweden did not widely share.

The first settlers in 1638 came primarily for trade and established generally peaceful relations with the Native peoples of the Delaware Valley. These included the Lenape and the Susquehannocks (also known as the Conestoga), whom Europeans called the Minquas.

As more expeditions arrived, New Sweden gradually evolved from a trading outpost into a permanent colony. Farmers, craftsmen, women, and children joined the settlement, establishing homes and farms while trade remained an important part of the colony's economy.

In 1655, the Dutch takeover of New Sweden happened with overwhelming force and little bloodshed, but it was far from peaceful. Dutch soldiers pillaged villages, killed livestock, stripped settlers naked to humiliate them, and held the men captive on ships for weeks. From that point on, New Sweden became part of New Netherland until 1664, when the English seized the colony. In 1673, the Dutch briefly recaptured the colony, but it was returned to England the following year, in 1674.

In 1681, control of the region shifted again when the English Crown granted William Penn the proprietary colony of Pennsylvania. Penn arrived the following year, in 1682, and enacted the Great Law. Penn understood that without absorbing the existing European population into the English legal system, the courts could be tied up for decades with disputes over land ownership and legal rights. The Great Law was his solution. Under it, Swedes, Finns, and Dutch who wished to enjoy the full legal rights of English subjects, including the ability to own land and participate fully in government, were required to become naturalized. Indigenous peoples were not, as they were recognized as separate political entities.

The conquest of New Sweden marked the end of Swedish rule, but not the end of its people. Some remained in the Delaware Valley, while many Swedish and Finnish families gradually relocated across the Delaware River into New Jersey, where their descendants helped shape new communities. Although New Sweden disappeared from the map, its people became part of the foundation of Pennsylvania and New Jersey alike.

About the Author:

Carla Welsh is a descendant of Olof Stille, his daughter Ella, and Hans Mansson, who arrived in New Sweden from Sweden in 1641. They were Swedes. She is also a descendant of Kerstin (thought to be a Finn), who was the maidservant of Johan Risingh, the last governor of New Sweden. Kerstin is the progenitor of the Toy/Tay families. Carla’s ancestors first lived in what is now Delaware County, Pennsylvania, later relocated to Philadelphia, and by the 1680s had crossed the Delaware River into New Jersey, where they adopted the surname "Steelman." Carla has documented and proven her ancestry through the Swedish Colonial Society, where she holds Forefather status. Around 1950, her grandmother returned to Delaware County, bringing her family full circle after more than 300 years.

NEW SWEDEN
In 1643 the colony's Governor, Johan Printz, established its capital here on Tinicum Island. Earlier, in 1638, New Sweden had been founded at the site of present Wilmington. Although the colony was captured by the Dutch in 1655, many Swedish and Finnish settlers remained. This was the region's first permanent European settlement, some four decades before William Penn's 1681 founding of Pennsylvania.
PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL AND MUSEUM COMMISSION
1988

Photo taken by the author. Location: Governor Printz Park, Essington, Delaware County, Pennsylvania.

MINQUAS' PATH
Near here the trading path leading westward to the Susquehannock Indians crossed Ridley Creek. Thousands of beaver skins were sent yearly to the first Dutch and Swedish posts on the Delaware by this route.
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Photo taken by the author in 2017. Location: Rose Valley, Delaware County, Pennsylvania. Sadly, in 2021, the bronze beaver sculpture and its accompanying bronze tablet were stolen. Neither has ever been recovered.

Photo taken by the author in 2017. The sculpture was stolen in 2021. The beaver was created by Philadelphia artist Albert Laessle, who also sculpted the famous bronze penguins at the Philadelphia Zoo and the Billy the Goat statue in Rittenhouse Square.